DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 595 CS 509 341

AUTHOR Hon, Linda Childers
TITLE "What Have You Done for Me Lately?": Exploring Effectiveness in Public Relations.
PUB DATE Aug 96
NOTE 54p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (79th, Anaheim, CA, August 10-13, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Definitions; Higher Education; Interviews; Occupational Surveys; *Organizational Communication; *Organizational Effectiveness; *Organizational Objectives; *Public Relations
IDENTIFIERS Media Relations; Practitioners

ABSTRACT

Little academic research has examined what public relations actually does for an organization. A study explored definitions of effectiveness in public relations and the value of effective communication. Interviews with 32 practitioners and 10 organization heads revealed numerous definitions of effectiveness, most having to do with achieving objectives for communication programs. The organizations for which these practitioners work include corporations, nonprofits, government, associations, and public relations agencies. Information is anecdotal and represents a breadth of perspectives. Some of the respondents included an adjunct professor who mentioned that effectiveness in employee relations makes money for organizations by improving job satisfaction and productivity, a publications manager for a state university who believed that her internal communications efforts have boosted job satisfaction and morale, and a director of development and alumni relations for a state university who argued that the visibility generated by effective public relations advances her department's goals. Other examples of effective programs uncovered are those whose respondents believe that public relations brings value by helping organizations survive when threatened, making money by fostering good relationships with key publics, and saving money through preventive media relations. One executive argued that the communication function could be elevated by better conveying the power and value of public relations in helping organizations move toward their goals. (Contains 60 references.) (Author/NKA)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

"What Have You Done For Me Lately?" Exploring Effectiveness in Public Relations

by
Linda Childers Hon
Assistant Professor
Department of Public Relations
College of Journalism and Communications
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611
352-392-6522
LHon@jou.ufl.edu

Paper presented to the Public Relations Division
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Anaheim, CA
August 1996

CS505341

The author wishes to thank Dean Terry Hynes and the College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, for funding this research through the faculty summer research program. Thanks also go to doctoral student Kerry A. Crooks and Professor Emeritus Charles G. Wellborn, both of the University of Florida, for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.

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ABSTRACT

"What Have You Done For Me Lately?" Exploring Effectiveness in Public Relations

by
Linda Childers Hon
Department of Public Relations
University of Florida

This research explores definitions of effectiveness in public relations and the value of effective communication. Interviews with 32 practitioners and 10 organization heads revealed numerous definitions of effectiveness, most having to do with achieving objectives for communication programs. Examples of effective programs uncovered that respondents believe public relations brings value by helping organizations survive when threatened, making money by fostering good relationships with key publics, and saving money through preventive media relations.

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"What Have You Done For Me Lately?" Exploring Effectiveness in Public Relations

"We're not asked to show numbers, but we always have to show value. It's sort of, 'What have you done for me lately?'"

> Vice president, corporate communications, mortgage banking company, on accountability in public relations

Purpose of the Study

Public relations practitioners increasingly face the challenge of demonstrating that their programs make a value-added contribution to their organization (Geduldig, 1986). In a organizational environment characterized by downsizing and zero-based budgeting, public relations no longer can convincingly argue that the function is justified without evidence of measurable results (Hause, 1993; Lindenmann, 1988, 1993).

Ironically, though, little academic research has explored what public relations actually does for an organization. Attention has been given to evaluation of public relations programs (Bissland, 1990; Broom & Center, 1983; Broom & Dozier, 1983; Dozier & Ehling, 1992; Kirban, 1983; Lindenmann, 1990; Reeves, 1983; Wiesendanger, 1994). However, most often the discussion has focused on evaluating effects on publics rather than the value public relations programs brings to organizations (see, however, Campbell, 1993; Ehling, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Winokur & Kinkead, 1993).

That is, evaluation typically stresses measuring effects on targeted groups' opinions, attitudes, and behavior. Less scrutiny has been given to explicitly linking these program effects to meaningful outcomes for the organization. Even the popular formulas for designing public relations campaigns and programs, such as "RACE," neglect to make explicit the most important step--communicating how public relations successes make a

value-added contribution.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the following research questions:

What is effectiveness in public relations?

What value does effective public relations bring to organizations and clients?

Significance

Investigating the effectiveness of public relations is the next step in a natural evolution of research within the field. To date, several distinct research domains exist in public relations. Most extensive are the studies of models of public relations, or how the public relations function is constructed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992), and research on public relations roles, or what public relations people actually do (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1985, 1986; Broom & Smith, 1978; Dozier, 1992; Ferguson, 1979). The logical next phase involves the other side of the equation–looking at how public relations activities produce consequences for an organization.

Beyond contributions to a theoretical framework, though, lie striking implications of effectiveness research for the professional community. PRForum on the Internet became embroiled in a spirited discussion about measures of public relations outcomes. Some "effects" that were posed and critiqued included increased inquiries, sales, votes, attendance, and donations, more volunteers, improved employee morale and job satisfaction, and costs saved by avoiding litigation and negative issues campaigns to fend off external pressure.

Everyone in the discussion seemed to share the view that public relations

outcomes can and should be identified and measured. Susan Getgood, manager of marketing and communications for Microsystems Software Inc., explained this idea:

> If, as many of the posters on this topic have said, PR...is to be taken seriously as the other business disciplines with which it competes for budget, it must be evaluated by the same type of measures. It works. We know it. And we can prove it if we choose. If we don't begin to develop measures that can cost justify the activity within our own organizations, we do run the risk of the $$. . .being assigned to other areas. (December 19, 1994)

Several Forum participants linked public relations results to organizational goals. "Part of what we need to do is to incorporate a wider array of ways to 'measure' effectiveness," said B.J. Altschul, an independent consultant and educator. "[We need] ways to establish whether and how well we helped our organizations achieve their strategic goals (emphasis added) (December 17, 1994)."

Related Literature

> "I doubt seriously if you can find five people who can give you five metrics to measure the effectiveness of the public relations department. One of the things about public relations is that you know when you got good stuff, but you never know when you don't. If you have a class act department, you are going to do well whether you are budgeted are not. But class act people aren't going to work for peanuts."
>
> President, federal sector, government contracting firm

What is Effectiveness in Public Relations?

Levels of Effectiveness

Certainly, no widely-agreed upon definition of public relations effectiveness exists in the literature. Nor is there much discussion of the different levels at which public relations effectiveness can be assessed.

On this point, effectiveness can be conceptualized at four levels at least. Although the levels are not mutually exclusive, making explicit the distinction among them can inform theory and practice.

The first level is that of individual practitioners. How effective are they at achieving whatever is expected of them? These expectations vary across organizations and may include media placement, counseling management, or even just making the CEO look good.

The second level of public relations effectiveness rests with programs (see Broom and Dozier, 1990; Broom & Center, 1983; Kendall, 1996). Did public relations activities accomplish the goals and objectives (assuming there were some) they were designed to? The assumption is that if programs produce intended (and sometimes favorable unintended) results in a cost-efficient manner, then they are effective.

Broom and Dozier (1990) and Dozier (1990), in particular, have provided insights into public relations evaluation at this level. Dozier has identified a continuum of program measurement that ranges from seat-of-the-pants to formal scientific methods.

The next level, though, that of the organization, remains elusive. Most public relations texts stress the importance of public relations' goals stemming from the organizational mission, goals, and objectives. However, few explicitly articulate the value added to organizations when public relations goals are accomplished.

In 1977, University of Maryland sponsored a forum about measuring the effectiveness of public relations (see Broom, 1977; Franzen, 1977; Grass, 1977; J.

Grunig, 1977a, 1977b; Lerbinger, 1977; Marker, 1977; McElreath, 1977; Stamm, 1977; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1977; Tirone, 1977). Again, though, most of the discussion assumed that effectiveness in public relations is synonymous with effectiveness at the program level. However, McElreath (1977) pointed out that an "open systems model of public relations asks the most difficult question: How is public relations related to overall organizational effectiveness?" (p. 129).

The Institute for Public Relations Research and Education has probed this question (Barlow, 1993). Through interviews with corporate executives and academicians, the Institute addressed how objectives for public relations are established and how the results of public relations programming can be assessed. The Institute tried to identify a "macro-level" measurement of public relations effectiveness, but interviewees generally felt that current research techniques are not adequate for doing so.

Medialink Public Relations Research investigated the effectiveness issue among practitioners at the 1994 convention of the Public Relations Society of America ("Measurement popular in the U.S.," 1995). Medialink's survey revealed that 99 percent of respondents said they are measuring programs in part to help prove public relations' value.

At the same time, though, Medialink found a discrepancy between what practitioners and CEOs think is the best measure of effectiveness (Weiner, 1995). Ninety-eight percent of practitioners believed that number of positive stories in the

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media is paramount. Less than 60 percent measure awareness and attitudes. However, a 1992 survey (conducted by PRSA's Detroit chapter) of Michigan-based CEOs found that organization heads feel that awareness levels and attitude change are most valuable. This group rated media clippings as least worthy.

The limitations of the program effects model assumed by these practitioners and CEOs, however, are two-fold. First, rarely is program impact explicitly assessed in relation to organizational goals. Perhaps more than ever before, CEOs may be receptive to practitioners' efforts to make the connection. Winokur and Kinkead (1993) argued that "CEOs are increasingly supportive of, and regularly identify, public relations as a vital factor in the success of their various enterprises" (p. 16).

Campbell (1993) also found that most CEOs acknowledge the importance of public relations. She discovered, though, that CEOs have difficulty measuring bottom-line impact, and many never explicitly relate public relations to effects on the organization.

A second limitation of using program impact only to assess effectiveness has to do with measuring what did not happen because of successful public relations. What is the value to an organization of keeping a story out of the media, or the value of the crisis, lawsuit, boycott, or regulation that was averted? Lesly (1986) mentioned this "prevention" factor and said it "may be by far the most valuable service" of public relations (p. 7; see also Lesly, 1991).

J. Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, L. Grunig, Repper, and White's (1992) theory of

"excellence" in public relations is one conceptualization of effectiveness that goes beyond program effects. The underlying assumption of this research is that effective public relations programs help manage interdependencies with "strategic constituencies (external or internal), which work to either support or oppose desired outcomes" (L. Grunig, Dozier, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 1; see also Lindeborg, 1994). In other words, effective public relations helps organizations make and save money by building positive, long-term relationships with publics. Thus, the measure of effective public relations is not just whether public relations programs achieve communication objectives. Instead, the acid test becomes to what extent does public relations contribute to the bottom line?

J. Grunig et. al's (1992) research was directed toward identifying the conditions that foster effective public relations and the dollar value of successful communication. In their survey of over 200 organizations, they found that CEOs and heads of public relations departments estimated the rate of return for effective public relations at 184 percent and 188 percent, respectively (J. Grunig, L. Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, Repper, & White, 1991).

However, follow-up interviews with practitioners and CEOs revealed that many respondents were either unable or unwilling to attach a monetary figure to the value of effective public relations. Many interviewees did not see the contribution as an isolated return on investment.

As a senior vice president at a midwestern utility said:

> I don't think you can link the dollars you spend on public relations to every bottom line. If you believe that it is there; if you value [public relations]; if you have an intuitive sense that it is there, then you will devote human and capital resources to it. If you don't, you won't. (L. Grunig, Dozier, & J. Grunig, 1995, p. 58)

Nevertheless, some interviewees did come up with dollar figures. One of the most compelling examples was that of effective media relations at a blood bank:

> This blood bank was able to avoid the drop in blood donations at the peak of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Many people had developed an irrational fear that donating blood might somehow increase their risk of contracting the HIV virus [sic]. Effective media relations are credited by both communicators and members of the dominant coalition with minimizing the drop to about 3 percent during the worst year of the scare. Blood banks in a comparable city experienced a 15 percent drop. Using the unit price of blood in 1994, the blood bank...saved...$1.24 million in retained donations. (p. 63)

The final level at which public relations effectiveness can be assessed is <u>society</u>. This level is examined most frequently from either a "systems" or a "critical" perspective (Toth and Heath, 1992). A systems approach assumes that public relations plays a positive role in democratic societies by fostering equilibrium among interdependent systems. That is, effective public relations helps organizations adjust to expectations from the organizational environment (internal and external). The ultimate outcome is what J. Grunig (1987) has referred to as "interest group liberalism," or shared (at least to some extent) decision making in social, political, and economic arenas.

A critical worldview, on the other hand, suggests public relations activities often have negative consequences upon democratic processes. Public relations can be used by organizations to help maintain systems of domination over groups of

lesser power (Deetz and Kersten, 1983). Similarly, rhetorical scholars have focused on how organizations use persuasive public relations tactics to manipulate publics (Heath, 1992).

Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, and Terrell (1993) implicitly address communication effectiveness at the societal level in their discussion of "externalities." They acknowledge that public relations activities have both positive societal effects (e.g, saving lives through health communication campaigns) and negative societal outcomes (e.g., forestalling initiatives of environmental groups).

Assumptions about Public Relations Effectiveness

Although both the individual and societal levels provide myriad research questions about effectiveness in public relations, this study isolates the program and particularly organizational levels. However, in doing so, several assumptions are made. The first may be obvious: The effectiveness of individual practitioners is linked inextricably to program effectiveness. Effective programs are showcased here by talking to the people who developed them.

The second assumption, however, may not be so apparent: This study adopts a systems perspective by taking for granted that public relations does contribute to democratic functioning. Simply put, this analysis is "pro" public relations or what scholars call "administrative" research. Critically examining negative externalities or manipulative intent is not the emphasis here.

Methodology

> "Too often people [public relations practitioners] aren't paying attention. But, someday, somebody, on some committee, is going to say, 'Bring me a report on the effectiveness. . .of everything you have done for the last five years.' At that point, it's too late. . . .This is the point where people get bounced."
>
> Senior vice president, public relations agency

Given the scarcity of research linking public relations effectiveness to organizational goals, an exploratory, qualitative methodology is most appropriate (see Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Instead of testing preconceived hypotheses, qualitative research reveals new ways of thinking about the topic under investigation.

The Active Interview

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) outlined an innovative framework for qualitative interviewing they call the "active" interview. This scheme rejects the quantitative standpoint that interviews should be free from subjectivity. Holstein and Gubrium argued that each interviewing situation is a unique act of creating meaning between the researcher and the respondent. Thus, there is no neutral baseline of information to be compromised nor can participants bias what they are actively and subjectively creating.

As Holstein and Gubrium explained:

> Any interview situation–no matter how formalized, restricted, or standardized–relies on the interaction between interview participants. Because socially constructed meaning is unavoidably collaborative (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), it is virtually impossible to free any interaction from those factors that could be construed as contaminants. All participants are inevitably implicated in meaning making. (p. 18)

The active interview also can be distinguished from other qualitative approaches.

Ethnography and feminist approaches validate the experiential aspect of the interviewing situation. However, interviewees still typically are seen as "vessels of answers" or "repositories of facts and related details of experience" (Holstein & Gubrium, pp. 7-8). Thus, implicitly the purpose of the interview is to uncover information and experiences "held in the vessel of answers behind the respondent" (p. 8).

An active approach, however, rejects the image of the vessel waiting to be tapped. The interview is continually under construction using the interpretative resources that the interviewer and interviewee have at hand. However, this ethnomethodological perspective does not imply that researchers and participants come to the interview as blank slates. But, the active interview acknowledges that participants add, take away, and transform facts and details as the interview unfolds.

Holstein and Gubrium used Pool's (1957) drama metaphor to explain the dynamics of the active interview:

> Its narrative is scripted in that it has a topic or topics, distinguishable roles, and a format for conversation. But it also has a developing plot, in which topics, roles, and format are fashioned in the give-and-take of the interview. This active interview is a kind of limited "improvisational" performance. The production is spontaneous, yet structured–focused within loose parameters provided by the interviewer. (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, p. 17)

Interviewing Procedures

With this framework in mind, thirty-two public relations practitioners,[1] drawn from contacts in the professional community (and those suggested by the respondents

[1] Although some interviewees have titles suggesting other roles, such as marketing, none of the interviewees disavowed being a public relations practitioner. Several mentioned that, although others in the organization perceive them as marketers, they believe their role is public relations.

who were interviewed first) were selected. The organizations these practitioners work for include corporations, nonprofits, government, associations, and public relations agencies.

A telephone interview[2] (lasting 30 minutes to one hour) was conducted with each practitioner. In 10 of the organizations, the CEO or another top manager outside of public relations also was interviewed for about 20 to 30 minutes (a total of 42 interviews). The goal of the conversations with other managers was to garner insights from members of the organization's dominant coalition, or group of key decision makers. Each of these organizational leaders had been suggested by the practitioner who was interviewed.[3]

Participants were asked open-ended questions having to do with defining effectiveness in public relations. However, most of the interview was spent discussing examples of effective public relations. Respondents were asked to describe any public relations activity that they thought resulted in some positive outcome for the organization. The value of the outcome to the organization then was probed. Participants also were queried about public relations efforts that prevented some negative outcome and what the value of that prevention was.

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[2] Three of the interviews were conducted in person because these practitioners were local to the researcher.

[3] This should be kept in mind when assessing the findings. Practitioners no doubt were more likely to suggest someone who they believed valued public relations than someone who would be critical.

Data Analysis

Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed either verbatim or by summarizing some passages. These data then were arranged under the research question they addressed. Next, comments were grouped by overlapping themes and issues. Quotations and examples were chosen to illustrate main points.

By its very nature, data analysis for active interviewing is subjective. This apparent weakness actually is what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argue is the distinguishing strength of the active interview. That is, a conventional notion of reliability is rejected. If each interview is a distinctive act of meaning making, then reliable (consistent) measures are neither logically possible nor desirable.

The validity of the data is wholly dependent upon the researcher's and respondent's jointly capturing and expressing the concepts of interest. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) pointed out: "The validity of answers derives not from their correspondence to meanings held within the respondent but from their ability to convey situated experiential realities in terms that are locally comprehensible (p. 9)."

Given this fluidity, how does one assess the integrity of the data? The "truth" value is linked to respondents' ingenuity when discussing their experiences. What distinctive insights were revealed? Do these insights provide useful information for scholars, practitioners, and other managers? Does the study yield efficacious descriptions of effectiveness in public relations and the value of successful communication initiatives?

Another measure of the study's merit lies in the breadth of perspectives revealed.

How do the findings suggest variable conceptualizations of effectiveness? How can these myriad definitions and examples inform public relations scholarship and practice?

Limitations

Obviously, this inquiry is not intended to document a causal relationship between specific public relations activities and organizational effects. Only a handful of practitioners described any formal evaluation of public relations. This evaluation, all at the program level, typically involved behavior tracking (e.g., number of inquiries, attendance) or attitude surveys, either one-shot or pre-test/post-test. And, several practitioners stressed that public relations does not occur in a vacuum. Numerous factors–both internal and external to the organization–contribute to or hinder the success of communication efforts. Of course, these factors might be controlled for by evaluation using an experimental design (see Reeves, 1983; Broom and Dozier, 1990). But, no one described research of this kind.

What is presented here then is an array of anecdotal evidence that suggests practitioners and other managers believe public relations can and does make a value-added contribution to organizations. Some perceived effects are indirect, yet recognized as real and important. Others are directly related to the bottom line.

Another limitation is that the nonprobability sample used implies that the findings are not necessarily generalizable. External validity is never the hallmark of qualitative research. Rich responses and opportunity for fresh discovery are key.

As Paul Sanchez, national practice director for Employee Communications

Consulting, the Wyatt Company, pointed out: "Management is not concerned about crossing all the t's and dotting the i's of methodological purity. Rather, they are concerned about getting information that is useful to them for solving some of their problems" (quoted in Broom and Dozier, 1990, p. 256).

Findings

> "If management has the right to expect people in a production line or accounting office or sales office to show how they moved the needle, it's only a matter of time before they require the same standard of performance [for public relations]."
>
> National vice president, public affairs, nonprofit health association

What is Effectiveness in Public Relations?

This question yielded almost as many answers as there were interviewees. Yet, there were some common themes.

Addressing goal achievement, a director of corporate communications for a government contracting firm said that public relations "has to be a very connected position." She believed that effectiveness is determined by how "plugged in" practitioners are to the goals–both internal and external–of the organization.

"Some [public relations] situations are very separate and they become service departments," she said. "They operate in a vacuum. Unless you are plugged in, you can only be so effective."

A community liaison for a national health institute agreed: "Public relations has to help the organization meet its goals and objectives and support the institution's mission." She acknowledged, though, that the link is often intangible.

"[There is] kind of this process it has to go through," she said. "[Effective public relations] is more a long-term investment in your communications."

Others mentioned increasing understanding and facilitating two-way communication. The director of public relations and communication for a health benefits provider said that effectiveness is "increasing people's–the provider community, the legislative body, various constituency groups–understanding." She mentioned that others in her organization "do understand the concept of mutual understanding and that the company needs someone to facilitate the [two-way] channel."

A marketing specialist for a management consulting firm said that effectiveness is synonymous with two-way communication. "We are not just sending communication out to key publics," she said. "We are listening to what they have to say and turning it around and reacting to it."

Similarly, a communications associate for the technology transfer office of a state university said:

> Before I was involved, it [effective public relations] was getting out as much as we could, no matter if people wanted it or not. We are trying to target it more, give people the opportunity to request things, rather than just adding them to mailing lists. We're doing more two-way communication, getting feedback from people.

Some respondents defined effectiveness as building relationships. A vice president of corporate communications for a mortgage company said that "some people think it [effective public relations] is parties and promotions," while others think effective public relations is just good media relations. She added, though, that "there is a strong sense of building relationships (with customers)." Thus, for her, effectiveness is building

those relationships that bring in business.

Still others focused on disseminating the right message. A writer/editor for a trade association captured this idea. "[Effective public relations is] getting the point across, your ideas across, communicating what you want to communicate," she said.

A vice president for a medium-sized agency talked about "the successful placement of the message that matches the goals of the program." She noted, though, that effective public relations is sometimes "keeping names out of the newspaper and off TV or trying to get a positive or less-than-horrible message out there." And, effective public relations controls the message "so that the truth is told and not some widely exaggerated story."

Some practitioners described working through the public relations process. A director of external relations for a international exchange association mentioned "making sure our objectives are related to our goals, evaluating throughout, seeing how people are responding," and "taking what you learn and putting it back into the process."

Communicating strategically was another definition. A management associate in corporate communications at a passenger railroad explained that he and his colleagues at headquarters "have envisioned ourselves as those who can take a step back, look at the long-term strategic [public relations] concerns." He noted that the business units are "so busy with the day-to-day" that they do not have time to think long term.

A director of university relations for a state university said that effective public relations is both strategic and opportunistic:

> The knee jerk response is that it has to be strategic, targeted to specific goals. That's not the way it is. Most days, I don't even determine what I am going to do because forces outside my control determine what I am going to do. . .responding to media inquiries, crises. We need to accept that this is a legitimate part of what we do. The strategic plan is what goes on all the time, but opportunities come up that you can feed into the strategic plan.

Two participants talked about earning respect. A vice president of corporate communications for a spice company mentioned earning the respect of the operating units and their personnel by developing public relations pieces that save the units money (by not having to rely on an external vendor). "I don't want to be known as the department of parties and good times," he said.

A manager of policy and program communications for an animal rights and conservation organization mentioned "being respected as an organization as a result of what we [the public relations department] did." This respect, she said, translates into "raising money to do the important work that our scientists do" and "establishing a two-way dialogue between the organization and persons calling so they will be as impassioned as we are."

Still others defined effectiveness as promoting and fostering good media relations. A campaign writer for a national religious institution mentioned "successful promotion, getting the big media hits, getting the [name of the organization] mentioned on the news."

A director of public affairs for a highway safety coalition mentioned "putting ourselves on the map very quickly; within two years of founding, we had established ourselves with the media." As she said, "We are in people's Rolodex when they are

going to do a highway safety story."

A public affairs adviser for an oil company thought that effectiveness has to do with changing attitudes. Public relations works when it "causes movement toward our position in our targeted public," he said. His job is to "move more [people] from against our position to accepting and for our position."

Changing behavior also was heard. "There's no question that it [effective public relations] is behavioral," said the executive director of an advisory board to the peanut industry.

This practitioner also talked about contributing to the bottom line. "It [effective public relations] is a very bottom-line, economic issue," he said. "Whether it's a regulatory or consumption issue–it's economic. Farmers live and die by market prices every year. It doesn't take them very long to figure out whether PR is working or not."

Another practitioner recalled the link between effective public relations and the bottom line in her former job as public relations/marketing director for a private school. "We're held more accountable," she said. "Companies run by their profit and their profitability and we have to be attuned to that. At my school, it was dollar driven. The bottom line was that they needed tuition dollars."

Affecting legislation was another theme. A manager of equipment services for a trade association commented: "With a mission of making policy that [public relations effectiveness] is a tough question. You can do all you can, and things [in Congress] can go wrong that are beyond the organization's control." Yet, she added, "I can say that we

would measure effectiveness in terms of laws being or not being passed in some cases."

A CEO of a medium-sized public relations agency thought that effectiveness has to do with innovating. "We can do things the same old way, but that is not going to advance our profession any," she said.

Last, a vice president of membership, marketing, and communications for a think tank/trade association suggested taking a situational perspective:

> It [effective public relations] is never one element. It's doing a good job day in and day out. . .There was a time when I thought it was an extremely flashy meeting or getting a good article in the paper. [But] it's a lot of little things that put together a picture, a mosaic that shows the culture and character of an organization. Our view now is that effective PR is doing a lot of little things right and that makes the big thing right.

How Do CEOs and Other Managers Define Effectiveness in Public Relations?

The CEOs and other managers provided even more definitions of effectiveness. The most common was heard earlier: disseminating a positive and accurate message.

A senior vice president and chief marketing officer for a health benefits provider said that effective public relations is "getting a message out to the right audience that is the correct message to meet [name of organization's] short-term/long-term strategic positioning and doing it in a cost-effective manner consistently."

Creating the right image also was referred to. A president of a state university mentioned "the degree to which the internal and external community understands the institution and the impression, the image, the public–both internal and external–holds about the institution." He added that "effectiveness is the extent to which PR is able to develop in the public's mind an accurate view of the institution."

A CEO for a spice company stressed public relations' meeting its objectives. For him, effectiveness is "the kind of things this area does for us–the annual report, special events, day-to-day dealing with the media–and how they [people in the public relations department] are meeting those objectives."

For a manager of policy and federal relations at an oil company, defining effectiveness was straightforward. "[Effective public relations is] facilitating our goal of achieving influence on legislation," he said.

Making a bottom-line contribution also was cited. "As with any support function, [effective public relations is] supporting the increase of shareholder value through increased earnings and growth," said the president (federal sector) of a government contracting firm.

A director of development and alumni relations at a private university mentioned supporting other functions' goals. She talked about public relations' role in "increasing membership in the alumni association, enhancing membership through special event opportunities, involving more alumni in fundraising, and whatever it might take to enhance the quality of our [development's] overall programming."

Representing the whole organization was the final definition offered. A senior associate for membership communications at an animal rights and conservation organization said that "PR has a much broader mandate [than membership and marketing]." And, she added that "not only is it [effectiveness in public relations] not quantifiable, it is much broader."

What Value Does Effective Public Relations Bring to Organizations and Clients?

Effective Public Relations Helps Organizations Survive.

Perhaps the most compelling answer to the value question is saving the organization from collapse. One practitioner described how public attitudes in one community were so negative toward the pharmaceutical company she worked for that management considered pulling out. Research had shown that people were not aware of the company's initiatives in disease prevention and research. "They only knew what they saw: eight-foot wire fences and smoke stacks," she said.

To celebrate the company's 50th anniversary, the public relations team orchestrated a year-long series of events designed to communicate how the company benefits the community. The plant also improved its physical appearance. Follow-up research documented that public perceptions had improved dramatically from the previous year. "It was a shame that it had to get to a near crisis situation before they brought in public relations," she added.

Similarly, a junior associate of marketing communications remembered that when she interned at a major public relations agency, the environmental team there was credited with salvaging a client. She explained that the client had been accused of emitting toxic chemicals and was shut down temporarily. Because of the agency's effectiveness, though, media coverage was balanced. Ultimately, an investigation cleared the plant.

Without this public relations counsel, the company "would not have been trusted

anymore," she said. "It saved them a lot of money. Financially, they could have been brought down."

A director of external relations for an international exchange organization mentioned the time some international visitors were maligned in the press. She said that her organization then worked with the sponsoring chapter and city to provide accurate information on why taxpayer money was being spent and why these visitors were selected.

"We thought we would have to deal with it in other cities, but it disappeared," she said. "The worst case scenario would have been that the program would have lost its Congressional funding."

Effective Public Relations Helps Organizations Make Money.

Many interviewees argued that public relations activities directly contribute to the bottom line of their organizations. Sometimes, even a single communications piece can supply big dividends. For example, a manager of policy and program communications for an animal rights and conservation organization mentioned how the New York Times picked up a release she had written about the plight of Siberian tigers. Upon reading the story, a celebrity sent in a check for $50,000.

Another effective venture was described by a vice president of corporate communications for a mortgage banking company. Her department has organized realtor roundtables, each involving six realtors who patronize the company and six who do not.

"The ones who are giving us business endorse us," she said. "They end up selling for us. We have seen very obvious results. Within a day or two, our loan officers are getting and taking applications from realtors who have never given them business before."

This vice president explained that her company understands the value of communication in building the realtor-loan officer relationship:

> To the extent that you can attribute a loan that came in, and loans are big numbers, if we have established a relationship with a realtor office, it could mean millions of dollars in volume. When a loan officer joins the company, it could mean 6 or 8 million dollars worth of business.

A director or public relations and communication for a health benefits provider discussed the value of her speech training for the CEO. While accompanying the CEO on a trip to make a presentation to a securities firm, she and the CEO made contact with five different investment firms that expressed interest in helping her organization fund going public.

"That's immediate dollars," she said. "They were very impressed with his presentation and professionalism."

A vice president of corporate communications for a spice company echoed this theme. He described a series of 10-minute videos featuring his CEO addressing a particular theme relevant to employees. This practitioner believed that the videos have strengthened the CEO's communication aptitude.

"I can't put a dollar value on what that's worth," he said. "But how much is the confidence of the CEO worth when he knows that he is a better communicator?"

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Another example was provided by a communications associate in the technology transfer office of a state university. Her department organized a week of special events on campus having to do with research and technology. The value was improving communication across departments so more cross-disciplinary research gets done (which may lead to more inventions, more licenses, and more money). The long-term goal was to generate funds by publicizing the university's research to the business community, which buys licenses, and to the state legislature, which funds much of the research.

A director of external services for an international exchange organization described an annual report that was such an effective public relations tool, members' donations matched government funding 12 to one, a jump from the previous year of 10 to one. This increase amounted to an extra $2 million for the association that year. She also developed a public affairs initiative that, in just one year, pushed federal funding for her organization from $460,000 to $1,460,000.

Other practitioners recalled programs and campaigns that garnered impressive rewards. A vice president of membership, marketing, and communications for a think tank/trade association recalled a campaign to increase donations. Baseline research helped her department identify three elements people look for in a nonprofit organization. Over a three-year period, she developed programs emphasizing these factors.

"It was nothing fancy," this practitioner said. "No extra money was spent except for research and not very much." Yet, she was able to show that the needle had moved

for levels of awareness. And, donations increased $10 to 15 million.

A passenger railroad found that, when the company needed to cut services in some states, effective communication helped convince states to buy back the rail lines. During the fiscal year when the first cuts were made, the buy backs amounted to $20 million.

During the current phase, the tally is over $2 million just for Illinois. And, as a management associate pointed out, everyone in the organization realized that the Illinois success was "95 percent the result of the communications director in Chicago who worked day and night to develop these agreements."

A manager of business and market analysis at the railroad affirmed the value of effective communication:

> Revenues are ahead of where we were last year....I think communication played a big role because we were able to re-accommodate people on other trains that were still running....We had projected to lose 55 percent of the revenue for when there was a frequency change for any day that a train didn't run. It ended up we retained just about all of it [revenue] on some routes....In fact, in Florida we have had a 25 percent increase.

A CEO of a medium-sized public relations firm believed that effective public relations increases sales. She recalled a campaign that her firm did for a glasses manufacturer. Her agency paired the company with a nonprofit eye care association to position the client as an advocate of eye care, emphasizing children's avoiding ultraviolet radiation. The company's pacesetter stance alone generated a lot of publicity. The agency then prompted the company to provide UV screening during back-to-school season, coat glasses, and offer glasses checks–all for free. After the campaign, traffic in

stores hit unprecedented levels, the new line of "kid safe" glasses was the most popular in the industry, and sales increased 1,000 percent.

Another agency executive outlined a successful campaign her firm developed for a tools manufacturer. By organizing events that coupled the client with a group that builds homes for the homeless, considerable media coverage was generated. The financial community also took notice.

"By the end of the year, they [the tools manufacturer] had sold the sub-brand into the top 90 percent of their accounts," she said. "We're not solely responsible, but we were part of it."

A director of corporate communications for a government contracting firm recounted the time her firm successfully bid for a project worth over $600 million. She explained that a $500,000, "full-blown" public relations campaign helped create a "name," an "image," a "culture" for her organization in the media and in the minds of the proposal reviewers.

"I don't know that anyone would credit the public relations portion with winning the project, but it played a crucial role in creating the image of the company," she said. "Some people realize it might not have happened without public relations."

This practitioner also provided an example from employee relations. She recalled how, eight years ago, her company was the target of a hostile takeover. Management then decided to make the company employee owned, thinking employees would be thrilled. Instead, employees were "confused, suspicious, disoriented, and worried," she

said. So, as she explained, corporate communications developed a "whole road show" to build support for the idea.

"People gained respect for public relations because it occurred to them that it isn't good enough to gave a good idea," she said. "You still have to sell [it], promote [it]."

This director summed up the success of the program:

> In the past eight years, we have doubled revenues, increased our backlog by one billion, we have bought 12 companies, restructured operations, increased our employee base by 30 percent, so there are measurable results, even though not all of them can be attributed to employees' being happy about being owners. But, it don't think it can be overlooked either.

An adjunct professor mentioned that effectiveness in employee relations makes money for organizations by improving job satisfaction and productivity. When her former employer, a financial institution, was undergoing a merger, employee morale and productivity were down. The communications department became advocates for employees, conducting research to identify employees' concerns and developing public relations programs for resolving issues.

"We measured response throughout the campaign and afterwards," she said. "We did affect opinions about jobs, the workplace, the bank, as well as its performance. It was a results driven effort. All publics saw that."

A publications manager for a state university also believed that her internal communications efforts have boosted job satisfaction and morale. She described a "much better flow of communications" since she was hired. She revamped the magazine for faculty and staff, started a newsletter for commuters, and began sending out

publications electronically to administrators, faculty, students, and staff.

"There was a problem with general apathy," she said. "If you work to set up this program and nobody knows about it or you don't receive recognition, then people will come to think, 'Why bother?.'"

A director of public relations and communication for a health benefits provider discussed how her media relations efforts are helping the company make money. She was successful in getting her organization on Inc.'s list of the 500 fastest-growing companies. In her mind, the increased visibility will lead to more sales. She believes the CEO thinks so too.

This practitioner went on to discuss how other media hits are driving sales up. She explained how a recent press release generated interest from a major trade publication. The result was an interview with the CEO and a four-page story.

"We have gotten six definite sales leads from that story," she said. "Others [in the organization] are thrilled. The sales team is giving me a hard time. They think I ought to be on commission."

A writer/editor for a trade association believed that effective public relations indirectly makes money for her organization by enhancing its stature. She described a certification program for member businesses that the association developed to counter publicity about the industry's negative impact on the environment. Although certifications bring in money, the real value of the program is showcasing the association's role as a leader among similar associations.

A public affairs specialist for a federal government agency also argued that the value of public relations lies more in effectively positioning the organization than direct, bottom-line impact. "Certainly, our goals aren't to make money for the organization, but to make the [U.S.] economy stronger," she said.

She explained that, as far as she knows, no one at her organization really talks about money made or saved by effective public relations. However, "the stronger we are at portraying [name of agency's] mission, we tend to find we have stronger funding," she added.

A marketing specialist for a telecommunications company mentioned how public relations promotes the image of her organization, indirectly leading to more customers and sales. She described a "solutions center" that the organization established where customers could view the company's equipment. The opening was accompanied by a press ceremony that resulted in extensive coverage.

"We were trying to position the company as not just a telephone company," she said. "As a result of the press coverage, they [customers] knew what we were setting out to do, and customers' coming in and seeing and dealing with the equipment in a hands-on way solidified this [message]."

A community liaison for a health care institute mentioned how her organization wanted to improve its community outreach, a factor in determining national designation (which opens the door to millions of dollars in government funding). She described a campaign that involved raising awareness in the community about breast cancer and the

institute's programs and mobile screening unit. She estimated the value of the publicity generated at $35,000.

Her CEO commented more on the indirect effect of successful public relations:

> The issue for us is that, in other universities, the people who do cancer need to perceive this institution as a player....They are the ones who are going to give grants and give the NIH [National Institutes of Health] designation to the place and so that's the whole mission of the place.

A director of public affairs for a highway safety coalition also pointed out how effective public relations can buttress the image of an organization. She mentioned successful negotiations with the automobile industry that led to requiring major components on high-theft vehicles to be marked.

"It was worth a tremendous amount of good will with Congress, a tremendous amount of prestige in being able to go up against the auto industry and successfully negotiate a favorable bill," she said. "Although the general public and the media never knew, some very important people to us knew. That's important too–those private audiences."

Effective Public Relations Helps Other Organizational Functions Make Money.

Several practitioners and other managers believed that public relations impacts the bottom line by advancing other functions within their institutions. A publications manager at a state university pointed out the connection between public relations and fundraising. She mentioned that one department at her university recently was awarded a $25 million grant.

"I can't say that public relations did it," she said. "But public relations had spent a

lot of time in the previous year selling the computer science department, pushing the contracts that they were getting. I'd like to think that the computer science department was able to say, 'Look at what we are doing.' We sold them and got the big payoff."

A director of university relations for another state university repeated this theme. He talked about an editorial campaign that emphasized what his university was contributing to the state.

"We had 15 glowing editorials that raved about the university," he said. "The value was to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of [name of university's] efforts throughout the state."

This practitioner believed that the ultimate result was more funding from the state legislature because constituents could see that "this is not an abstract university; this is the impact." He also mentioned that this program helped increase student retention among in-state students.

A campaign writer for a national religious organization made the point that "a lot of what public affairs does is played out by development." She said that "donors really like receiving the videotapes that public affairs produces, the letters we develop."

"We are cultivating the donors, reminding them of what we're doing," she said. "When I write letters to them, a lot of what I talk about is what public affairs does for development."

A senior associate for membership communications at an animal rights and conservation organization recounted a campaign to increase awareness about the plight

of rain forests and, thus, boost membership. She described how her department and public relations established "integrated task groups" to help the organization meet its objectives.

"We didn't just want to raise awareness," she said. "We wanted the audience to take action. That's something that the public relations office is not particularly interested in. That's not their objective, but it is our objective."

This manager described the campaign as "enormously successful." Ten thousand new members were added to the organization's rolls.

She went on to explain that most nonprofits are organized like her institution: "Membership is their bread and butter. And, public relations supports that activity."

Similarly, a director of development and alumni relations for a state university argued that the visibility generated by effective public relations advances her department's goals. She mentioned one development program that was "catapulted to the forefront" of the national media because of the public relations department's efforts.

"The value of the press is eminently important to all the things we do," she said. "The value of the things we do in putting forth information in newsletters and press releases is really the core of what our public relations office is able to accomplish."

This director also commented on the effectiveness of the alumni newsletter, arguing that it has helped increase membership in the alumni association and funds to the annual fund drive. "It is a motivating factor," she said.

Effective Public Relations Helps Organizations Save Money.

Many practitioners and other managers mentioned instances of money saved by successful public relations. For example, the executive vice president of an advisory board to the peanut industry recalled a successful media relations campaign to pressure the Food and Drug Administration into forcing manufacturers of reduced fat peanut products to label their merchandise as peanut "spread" rather than peanut "butter" (by law, peanut butter must contain 90 percent peanuts; the reduced fat products contain only 60 percent).

However, the association saw the campaign as more of a truth-in-marketing issue than a legal one. The association's research had shown that consumers were not aware that reduced fat products replace some peanuts with sugar and soy protein. Thus, if consumers were to switch to peanut "spread," thinking they were getting the same quality product as peanut "butter," farmers would stand to lose 30 percent of their crop value, or about $250 million.

This practitioner also described how important public relations is in convincing Congress to maintain price supports. "More than half of the current Congress has never voted on the farm bill, so education is paramount," he said. "We're the ones who can educate–unlike marketing or advertising."

He went on to explain that, if opponents are successful at reducing subsidies, peanut farmers will face a 50 to 60 percent income reduction. The industry total would be about $500 million annually.

A manager of equipment services for a trade association recalled a successful public relations trip she made designed to reassure members in one division that, despite organizational transitions, their needs were still top priority. She described the meeting as a preventative measure, conceived to forestall members' seceding. The bottom line impact of their doing so would have been 10 to 25 percent of the association's budget. More intangible would be the loss of prestige. She explained that, without this group, the association would not be able to hold their signature event–"the biggest equipment [trade] show on Earth."

A senior vice president of a major public relations agency mentioned a successful campaign to avert taxation on dental benefits. As she said:

> You can't get any more direct [evidence of public relations effectiveness] than having the majority leader of the U.S. Senate saying, "I am dropping taxation of dental benefits out of my bill based on letters and the messages that we have seen from you in advertising and the media." We had people who could quote the advocacy advertising that we did. We had legislators who said they saw the op-ed piece in the Boston Globe. All of that went into helping them [members of Congress] make decisions.

This practitioner went on to explain that the tax provision "would have destroyed the dental industry; there would have been millions of dollars of impact." The client had predicted that, if the tax had passed, half the people in the United States would have dropped their benefits.

Another example was provided by a public affairs advisor for an oil company, who discussed how his organization successfully stopped attempts to mandate severely refined gasoline in the Northeast to match requirements in California. The company

managed to keep the refined gasoline provision (as well as a mandate for zero emission, or electric cars) out of the specifications that the Environmental Protection Agency ultimately adopted.

This manager explained that his company was already spending $6 billion in extra refining costs in California, where the organization captures 12 percent of the market. "We would have had to spend other millions of dollars to refine that gas in the Northeast," he said. The company commands 25 percent of the market there.

A director of communications for a national confederation of social service agencies commented that effective public relations saves money for her organization's member groups. If successful at halting attempts to trim welfare benefits, the confederation will save members "millions of dollars," she said. "They would not lose money for their heating bills."

Several respondents talked about how effective media relations, in particular, can save organizations money. As a senior vice president and chief marketing officer argued, poor communication with the media can cost an organization a lot in the form of embarrassment and lost sales.

"You could undo a significant amount of investment overnight," he said. "You could spend a $100 million on advertising, but the wrong article at the wrong time could mitigate half of that. It could cost you a sale and affect your ability to make money in the long term."

Several practitioners also pointed out that effective public relations helps to defuse

media crises that could cost the organization money and its reputation. A vice president of membership, marketing, and communications for a think tank/trade association mentioned the United Way debacle involving the national president's mishandling of funds. She noted that the bad press cost the organization millions of dollars. "And, this doesn't count the money that would have been raised," she added.

A director of corporate communications for a government contracting firm recalled when an employee who had been fired for cause sued her firm, claiming he was fired illegally and the company was bilking the government. The allegation resulted in a government probe. She explained that the local paper wanted the firm to go on record. Instead, her department provided background information off the record to a reporter with whom the company had developed a relationship.

"He still did print the story but he printed it with some caveats that I think he would not have had we not taken the time," she said. "It was still damaging but there were some sentences that diluted the impact."

The company subsequently was cleared of all charges. The value of the media intervention was "quite a lot," this director said. "Even as it [the story] was, it raised a lot of questions; customers were very worried. If it had been as negative as it was first envisioned, we would have lost customers....*It could have been pretty disastrous.*"

A director of new services for a private university said that bad press can cost a lot by compromising positive perceptions of an institution. He mentioned the time that the student newspaper and another student group became entangled in debate about a

story the paper had published. He felt that his productive relationships with local media prevented the university's administration from "being dragged through" the controversy.

Effective Public Relations Helps Organizations Defuse Opponents.

Several practitioners explained how their successes have weakened opponents. A manager of policy and program communications at an animal rights and conservation organization recalled how her organization successfully petitioned the U.S. government to impose sanctions on four countries that still allowed trade in rhinoceros horns.

"We really worked on getting media pressure to announce sanctions," she said. "People really viewed it as a huge success....It was clear within the organization that the media and public relations played a huge part." The blocked trade cost one offending country alone $15 million.

A public affairs adviser for an oil company recounted how his organization successfully halted a competitor's attempt to secure government subsidies to pay for construction of a gas refueling station. His department launched an opposition campaign involving news releases, letters to editors, by-liners, and formally filing a remark in the case. The hearing officer subsequently ruled against the other organization.

"Although it didn't make a significant dollar contribution to us now, management appreciates the kind of things we can bring to the public discussion," he said. "There is a recognition of the benefit and value added."

Effective Public Relations Helps Organizations Save Lives.

Some practitioners described successful programs that had more to do with

advancing social goals than bottom-line concerns. A marketing specialist for a management consulting firm discussed an effective program at her former employer, a major trucking company. Her department developed a grass-roots campaign that involved sending the company's best drivers to high schools to demonstrate safe-driving principles. The organization received numerous letters mentioning that, because of the information, an accident had been avoided. Some mentioned that the presentations had saved the lives of children and other family members.

A director of public affairs for a highway safety coalition explained how her organization successfully lobbied to have dual air bags a standard feature in all new vehicles. The group's key strategy was recruiting would-be victims who had survived an accident because of an air bag.

"The 'saved' group became a public policy entity," she said. "We got them to testify, appear at press conferences, and editorial board meetings. Telling their personal stories was so compelling....The media support was overwhelming."

This practitioner then projected the value of the coalition's success: "In seven or eight years–time for the current fleet to turn over–we are estimating 7,500 lives a year will be saved. And, that's a conservative estimate."

A national vice president of public affairs for a health association described a campaign that made money for the organization's cause and no doubt will save lives. His organization was part of a coalition that successfully lobbied Congress for increased funding for breast cancer research and making annual screening part of general Medicare

coverage.

"We needed a truck because the [post]cards were so plentiful," he said. "It was very quantifiable. [It was] like a fundraising campaign. Congress apportioned a much higher amount of money to cancer research. [The] DOD (Department of Defense) was awarded a great amount of money for cancer research, a direct result of the campaign. The Medicare Act...also included screening."

If Public Relations Adds So Much Value to Organizations, Why is the Function Marginalized?

This final question was posed to the CEOs and top managers. Most acknowledged that public relations is vulnerable because of the difficulty of measuring its value-added contribution, especially in the short term. As a senior vice president and chief marketing officer for a health benefits company said: "Everybody values public relations, but it becomes unfortunately a long-term/short-term trade-off. Marketing public relations usually gets a lot more resources."

This executive also thought that marginalization is linked to organizations' tendency to be reactive:

> For the most part, executives want to make sure that if something happens, they knew it was coming. If it's really serious, put some resources into it to mitigate it, but...not a whole lot of money is spent on being proactive. Most of it [public relations] is feedback, being aware: "Get me to the right dinners, get me involved in the right speaking groups, make sure we're doing the right things in our community, make sure employees are involved in the United Way, do all the things that make the company do what anybody else is doing, but not any more."

A director of development and alumni relations for a private university explained public relations' devaluation this way:

> Because academic institutions, even though they don't suggest that they are, have a degree of bottom line, and I think that following business practices they...immediately see the direct result of fundraising or marketing expenses where again it's the difficulty and probably lack of knowledge about how to evaluate and value public relations and what it really does for the institution.

She went on to argue, though, that "as public relations continues to add to the mix of organizational development and as leadership becomes more enlightened about what it contributes to the whole, those programs probably in the future will be added to in terms of resources."

A state university president conceded:

> I think we don't spend enough [money] on public relations. No question about it. In tight budget times, it's awful hard to take money out of the classroom and put it in public relations. Every university is trying to do more in public relations. In the private sector, there is an immediate payoff. The payoff in higher education is on a much longer timeline. [We are looking at] people's opinions about the university so that somewhere down the line they'll vote for funding increases or donate gifts, but it's not the immediate payoff one sees from rising sales.

However, he also was optimistic about the future of public relations. He noted that the university's budget for public relations has been growing at a time when budgets are unstable in other areas. He pointed out how his institution's office of university relations has grown from one or two people to seven or eight in the past few years.

"We are definitely building up," he said. "But we haven't done enough."

A manager of business and market analysis for a passenger railroad was not so sanguine:

> I think in general it's because there isn't revenue directly tied to it. Communications is a cost center–not a profit center. And it's an easy thing to cut....You either run the train, which will help generate some revenue or you cut some sort of administrative function. And here's an administrative function that can be cut pretty easily, especially with advertising, where there is an outside contract. That's even better because then you don't have to eliminate your own people.

A president (federal sector) of a government contracting firm described marginalization as an "age old problem." He went on to say:

> If you look at corporations that have a product, public relations is budgeted way up there. You can't sell the product without effective public relations. In the service industry, I'm sure that I could sell the service without public relations. Would I do it as well? Probably not, so it [public relations] doesn't get funded because of its relative importance to other functions–such as marketing; those are elements that would be more apt to be funded with higher budgets. This isn't to dismiss the importance of the constituency, but it's just to say that, in our business, it's not as important.

Taking the opposite position, the CEO of a health institute denied shortchanging public relations: "I don't think we delegate small amounts of resources to it. I think we fund it pretty well because we see it as valuable. We don't just do it lavishly; we think about what we are doing."

Discussion

> "No, but I'm sure down the road I will. When the honeymoon wears off. . .they are going to say, 'What have you done for me lately?'"
>
> Director of public relations and communication, health benefits company, on the whether or not she must demonstrate measurable results

This research has revealed that these practitioners and organization heads believe that effective public relations can be defined in many ways. The variability reported underscores the dynamism and situational aspect of effective communication.

The myriad definitions also provide examples of effectiveness at almost all of the levels outlined earlier. For example, when one vice president talked about effective public relations as "earning respect," he implied judging effectiveness of practitioners as individuals.

Most practitioners, though, provided definitions that had to do with program effectiveness–communicating the right messages, changing attitudes and behavior, fostering good media relations, and so on. CEOs also, for the most part, conceptualized effectiveness in public relations as achieving discrete communication objectives.

Yet, some practitioners and other managers made the leap from program impact to effects on the organization. Several did this implicitly by referring to effectiveness as building relationships with key publics.

Others expressed the link directly. As one senior executive said, public relations' task is much broader than accomplishing specific communication initiatives. For her, effectiveness has more to do with how well the public relations department represents

the whole organization. Similarly, one public relations manager stressed that effective communication is "connected" to the goals of the organization. And, several respondents argued that, without a doubt, effectiveness at their organizations means little other than contributing to the bottom line.

No one explicitly mentioned societal impact although this theme did emerge in some of the programs that were described. The oil company that thwarted tougher environmental restrictions illuminates social and economic effects (more pollution but lower fuel prices) of public relations initiatives. And, the communication programs that improved health and safety provide potent evidence of public relations' beneficial impact on society.

When probed for specific examples, practitioners and CEOs easily could associate effectiveness in public relations with value-added contributions for their organization. This seamless connection suggests extraordinary implications for scholars and practitioners. Although the purpose of this research was not to test a specific theory, these anecdotal reports provide rich information that augments Grunig et al.'s (1992) conceptualization of public relations' impact on organizations.

The research reported here uncovers numerous cases of public relations' making money for organizations by developing communication programs that build positive relationships with media, customers, employees, members, donors, investors, legislators, and community publics. This study also suggests that public relations plays a key role in helping other functions–particularly institutional advancement and sales/marketing–

develop relationships that enhance organizations' revenues. And, examples showed that effective public relations indirectly elevates the organization by strategic positioning or defusing opponents.

Although none of these practitioners and top managers mentioned rate of return for public relations, many of the communication vehicles and programs that were described brought dividends that no doubt far outweighed costs. Effective public relations clearly is a good bargain for organizations.

Grunig et al. also theorized that effective communication saves money by building relationships that help organizations avoid pressure from activist groups, burdensome regulation, consumer boycotts, and lawsuits. Almost all of these costs were at least alluded to by these practitioners and organization heads. Most often interviewees described the cost-saving benefits of effective media relations. This prevention component in some cases was key to the organization's survival.

However, despite all of these accolades for public relations, some top managers agreed that the function too often is marginalized. Opinions were mixed about whether the stature of public relations is increasing or threatened more than ever. Either way, the challenge for scholars and practitioners remains to more clearly articulate how effective public relations helps organizations fulfill their mission, whether that is making money, saving lives, or some other goal not showcased here.

For PRSA President Luis W. Morales, making this link is an objective that the profession should tackle aggressively.. He argued that the communication function could

be elevated by better conveying "the power and value of public relations in helping organizations move toward their goals" (1996, p. 1). This research should help scholars and practitioners do just that.

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